

## POSTSCRIPT ON RERUM NOVARUM

Vincent Ponko, Jr. presented a paper on "Henry George's View of *Rerum Novarum*" at the First International Conference on Social Values. The paper, sent to us by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, indicates that the conference was held this past Summer at the Von Huegel Institute of St. Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, England, and that the co-sponsor was Iona College, New Rochelle, New York.

Ponko starts with the observation that the interpretation of Pope Leo's intent, in *Rerum Novarum*, was divided within the Roman Catholic Church at the time, 1891, and even remains so today. Citing the article by Dr. J. Brian Benestad in the January 1986 issue of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Ponko goes on to a detailed exposition of George's response, *The Condition of Labor: An Open Letter to Leo XIII*.

Ponko notes that "George demolished Leo XIII's contention that what is purchased by rightful property is rightful property by noting that the same argument could be used in the buying and selling of slaves." He goes on to note the demolition by George of several other papal assertions, including that private property in land deprives no one of the use of land (George lists historic examples to the contrary). George also makes the distinction between secure possession and private property.

As Ponko details, George even questions the religious assumptions of Leo's arguments, quoting George: "you give us equal rights in heaven, but deny us equal rights on earth." George notes that the early Christians did not separate words and actions, in their hope for the speedy reign of justice and "Thy Kingdom come on earth."

"The stars in the courses fight against Sisera, and in the ferment of today, to him who hath ears to hear, the doom of industrial slavery is sealed. Where shall the dignitaries of the Church be in the struggle that is coming, nay that is already here? On the side of justice and liberty, or on the side of wrong and slavery?" This question, cited by Ponko, that George put to the Pope over one hundred years ago, is even more relevant today... as the dispossessed workers of the world are being caught in an ever-tightening net of global economic monopoly and political domination.

There were, in George's day, clergy who chose the side of justice and liberty. On is reminded of Dr. Edward McGlynn, the Roman Catholic priest in Irish New

York who was temporarily excommunicated by the Vatican for supporting the Single Tax cause. That the upper levels of Roman hierarchy are more concerned with maintaining power and privilege is nothing new. The Middle Ages saw the Crusade against and slaughter of the Cathars in southern France. The Cathars denied papal authority as well as the Biblical imperative of sexual reproduction. It seems that while the pope wanted to protect his power, the feudal lords wanted to stamp out this threat to a growing labor force that would generate a growing feudal tribute. There are good reasons, if you are a landowner, employer, or member of the church hierarchy, to act to ensure that the birth rate is kept as high as possible. More people means more tribute, and competition among workers means lower wages. Even Saint Francis, who led a popular movement devoted to voluntary poverty, was almost excommunicated.

Today, there is a lot of evident and active concern for the poor and dispossessed among Roman Catholics. For example, there is the Catholic Relief Services "Operation Rice Bowl." This 1992 Lenten program "reflects the close links between caring for the poor and caring for the environment... when we examine the ecological destruction of our planet... we realize that a disregard and abuse of the environment reflects the inequitable distribution of the world's resources. The poor have access to limited resources and are therefore sometimes forced to misuse these resources to meet their basic human needs." So reads a flyer put out by Catholic Relief Services (209 West Fayette St., Baltimore, MD 21201-3443).

The flyer includes data from such organizations as Worldwatch Institute (e.g., there are now more than 13 million refugees in the world, due to political, economic and/or ecological conditions). Among the telling quotations is one from the Guatemalan Bishops, who call for compensation, as a matter of justice, for centuries of "neglect" suffered by the peasant and indigenous groups of their country.

A small box delineates the "Effects of Skewed Distribution: • landlessness leading to poverty and hunger • migration to already overcrowded cities with high rates of unemployment • frustration among the landless poor leading to armed conflict • destruction of rain-forests by people who desperately need land • deforestation leading to soil ero-

sion and extinction of species • overcultivation of existing croplands • exploitation of tenant farmers and sharecroppers who work for large landowners."

While the conclusion of this pamphlet does not mention the method George proposed, it certainly is in the spirit of justice that inspired his vision: "Let us be good stewards by caring for the earth and respecting the rights of all people to share in its many gifts."

-MAS